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36 The GAZETTE, Montreal, Sat., Oct. 11, 1975

Mellow syncopation

Cliff's reggae: Precious holler

Rock & Pop

by Juan Rodriguez

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Reggae music is not calypso, nor is it rhythm 'n' blues or Afro-funk or disco beat — although traces of these genres are surely to be found.

Reggae is the indigenous pop music of Jamaica, a melding of forms keynoted by warm tasty syncopated rhythms performed with a mellow touch. If you're in the mood, it is sunny sensual music, light and irresistible.

Because reggae is so much its own kind of music, it is doubtful whether it'll make it in a big way on the charts.

However, its popularity amongst rock-oriented audiences is increasing, due in large part to the film "The Harder They Come, which portrays reggae music as a way of life in Jamaica, along with the ganga weed (very strong marijuana), the poverty and the exploitation.

The star of that film, Jimmy Cliff, makes his local debut at Salle Wilfrid Pelletier on Oct. 20.

Cliff has been reggae's leading international exponent over the past dozen years, and it is fitting that the near autobiographical role he portrayed in the film has made it possible for the larger breakthrough made recently by Bob Marley & the Wailers (who recently attracted an audience of 18,000 in San Francisco). The progress of reggae — culminating in Marley's charged topical style — is the major thread running throughout Cliff's career.

RADIO SOUND

The son of a tailor, Cliff grew up in a small village near the tourist resort of Montego Bay and at 14 left for the capitol city of Kingston ostensibly to study at technical school. Like other Jamaicans, too poor to afford phonograph equipment, he listened to the U.S. rhythm 'n' blues sounds broadcasted from radio station in Miami and New Orleans, or from the "sound systems" unique to Jamaica, portable discotheques run by disc jockeys like Prince Buster, Duke Reid and Count Boysie. They played the American records until the DJs started recording local groups, from which the "ska" and "rock steady" beat became reggae.

Cliff went to Boysie for a recording session, and was paid the princely sum of one shilling, or 12 cents, which he turned down.

Eventually he was recorded by Leslie Kong, one of three Chinese brothers who owned Beverly's, a store that sold everything from ice cream to records.

At the age of 15, Cliff was a huge island success (and Kong was on his way to becoming Jamaica's most successful producer).

Since then, Cliff has toured and had hits in England, Europe, and through the Caribbean and South America. American success has eluded him thus far — although he's appeared in New York with one of Jamaica's popular bands, Byron Lee and the Dragonaires (who have a "second home" following in this city) and Bob Dylan once said that Cliff's Vietnam was the finest protest song he'd ever heard.

Perhaps part of the reason Cliff is still largely unknown to mass audiences here, is that his recordings released in America have been erratic, often watered down in a transparent style that wastes his talents.

His latest album, Follow My Mind (on Reprise), features slick horn arrangements and smooth production but much of the local nuance has been sacrificed.

HOLLER

However, his first record for Reprise, entitled Unlimited (released two summers ago), is excellent. Recorded completely at Byron Lee's famous Dynamic Studios in Kingston and featuring the cream of the Jamaican musicians, Cliff's sophisticated vocal style (more like a precious holler) is at home within the sunny syncopations.

Like the best reggae, the songs here reflect the social mores of Jamaica, which are considerably more absorbing than the romantic pap that characterized some of Cliff's American recordings. Similarly, the soundtrack to the Harder They Fall (on Island records) is no mere "soundtrack"; in fact, the music has the same spontaneous urgency that gave the film its documentary air.

On stage, minus the poor arrangements of his U.S. disc efforts, Cliff is both gritty and gentle, a captivating performer whose buoyancy is like the beat of the music itself.

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